

Wicked's Orchestrations and Arrangements

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Wicked Instrumentation

Question from before the show opened or the cast album came out:

Do you have the complete instrumentation for Wicked yet? I'm so curious to hear how you've orchestrated it. (Do you do your own orchestrations?)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The orchestral breakdown for WICKED is currently under discussion. I do not do my own orchestrations, and for this show, I will be working with Danny Troob again (among many shows and movies, Danny also did the orchestrations for POCAHONTAS; he is one of the best in the world.) He will probably be joined by another great orchestrator, Larry Hochman (who did some of the orchestrations for GEPETTO). The orchestral breakdown we are talking about, which is obviously subject to change, is currently: Four woodwinds (with all sorts of doubles), two trumpets, two French horns, two trombones (tenor and bass), four violins, cello, upright bass, harp, and a rhythm section composed of three keyboards, guitar, electric bass, drums and percussion. The idea is to be able to supply richness in the low-end, punch for the dance numbers, etc. and build around a pop core. We hope with the use of imaginative keyboard sounds and some unusual percussion instruments to give an other-worldly sound to the orchestration as well, so we know "we're not in Kansas anymore". Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

UPDATE from Carol:

Danny Troub had a schedule conflict so William Brohn came in and did an excellent job. If anyone is really into details they could compare the plan mentioned above with whatever is listed on the CD. I love the idea that for other worldly sounds. The wind chimes are a favorite of mine and some of the synth elements.

A related comment from Stephen Schwartz:

Orchestrations are not usually begun until a show is in rehearsal, so keys and the final routing of numbers are set. We begin rehearsals for WICKED in March, and I assume the orchestrations will be started at that time. In any event, orchestra rehearsals for the San Francisco production are scheduled to begin on May 17th, so they'll have to be done by then!

Wicked Orchestrations

Answer from Stephen Schwartz in response to a question about WICKED orchestrations:

I do not do my own orchestrations. Virtually no Broadway composers do, as there is too little time to do revisions to the show and orchestrate at the same time on a typical Broadway schedule. WICKED was orchestrated by the very talented Bill Brohn. We began the process of orchestrating the show by having discussions about each song, so I could let him know how I wanted them to sound and what emotional effects I was trying to achieve. Although we of course discussed the composition of the orchestra, the specific instruments for specific lines were mostly chosen by Bill. So by and large, the credit for the brilliant orchestrations you hear belongs to Mr. Brohn. Thank you again for your interest and enthusiasm for WICKED. All the best, Stephen Schwartz

Orchestrations

Question:

When I first listened to Wicked, I thought that the overture reminded me of Miss Saigon (my now 2nd favorite show). Of course I learned that you used the same orchestrator. How do you go about choosing someone to do that? How involved are you as the composer? Do you/Have you written your own orchestral scores?

Answer from Forum visitor Nick Hutson:

Stephen first heard Brohn's work through "Ragtime". Brohn is a master orchestrator - and, probably, the best in the business. Check out his Mary Poppins, Witches of Eastwick, (and modern production of) Oliver, My Fair Lady, Carousel and Oklahoma. The composer and the orchestrator always work very closely together... Here is something Stephen told me as regards orchestrations:"As always, I have a lot of input about orchestrations of my songs, particularly the rhythm sections (keyboards, guitars, bass, drums and percussion). And of course the orchestrator(s) and I will discuss extensively what other instruments to use and what they will be doing. But I also try to work with extremely talented orchestrators, such as Bill Brohn, who bring so much of their own creativity to the songs "I hope this helps! Stephen will have to personally answer the rest of your question. Happy New Year!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz

Hello and happy new year to all. The response that Nick graciously and conveniently posted to the original question (thanks, Nick), I think more or less answers it. In considering an orchestrator for WICKED, I was looking for someone whom I thought would be strong in areas where I am not, specifically the colorful and emotionally powerful use of standard acoustic orchestral instruments. I knew that with my own experience and the contributions of Stephen Oremus and Alex Lacamoire, probably the two best theatrical/pop arrangers in America, we were covered for the pop sound and the synths and electronic instruments and rhythm section in general. But there was so much in the musical conception of WICKED that was more classically oriented. As I said in the response Nick posted, I had first become strongly aware of Bill Brohn's work when I listened to his brilliant orchestrations for RAGTIME, and I was delighted when he accepted my invitation to work with me on WICKED. I think he more than fulfilled my expectations with his imaginative and technically superb work. Of course, now that I have embarked on writing an opera, that "job" carries with it the responsibility of orchestration, so I am studying hard in preparation. But since my days as a Juilliard student, I haven't really done any orchestration of that kind of scope, so it is a daunting (and exciting) prospect. Thank you for your interest, Stephen Schwartz

Wicked Instrumentation Question

Question:

Stephen, Upon listening to the Cast Recording of WICKED I hear some instruments in the orchestra that are very new to me, but they are absolutely perfect and really complete the circle of WICKED. One instrument I particularly notice I hear in the Prologue when Glinda enters, again when Boq is singing to Nessarose in "Dancing Through Life" and in various other instances in the show. I have no idea what it's called but it interests me very much. It sounds somewhat like an electric guitar but it seems as if you've taken the note and added ripples to it. Forgive me, you have an actor here who is trying to talk musically. The only comparison I can think of is that it sounds like how kids do when they talk into a fan and it creates that ripple in their voice. Dear God, me and my comparisons. But that is the only way I can explain the sound. I reminds me of an organ that my aunt has in her house, when you press a key there is a knob you can turn which will make the note vibrate. Any way, I was wondering if it is a new

instrument or if it is just an effect caused by a synthesizer. Thank you for trying to interpret what I've just tried to describe and I hope to hear from you soon.- Joe Lezza

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Joe: For someone who professes not to be a musician, you have very good ears. The instrument you refer to is an electric guitar with an attachment called a "Seek-wah" (I guess it's named that because it "seeks" out a "wah-wah" sound.) I agree it is a very cool sound. Thanks for noticing and appreciating it. The other cool guitar attachment we use is a slide-y sound that makes an electric guitar sound a bit like a pedal steel guitar. That attachment is called an "ebo", and I also used it a bit on my UNCHARTED TERRITORY CD. Anyway, glad you're a fan of the seek-wah in WICKED. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

"Music Arrangements"

Question:

The credits indicate that Alex and Steve were responsible for the "music arrangements". I was wondering what this all included. I am particularly interested in who did the vocal arrangements for "No One Mourns the Wicked." Thanks, Ryan

Answer from Carol de Giere:

Hi all. This was something I felt I needed to know. And I had an opportunity to interview Stephen Oremus, the music director, who was one of the arrangers.

As I've spoken to people involved with the show, I've learned that the apparent boundaries in work divisions are not really there as such. Just about every element of the show is a group effort, with the exception of the original creative work on such things as the notes of the score, dialog in the book, and imaginative concept of the set. It seems that a musical gets created by a group of artists collaborating all along the way, no matter what the Playbill may say about individual efforts.

Schwartz wrote awhile ago for The Schwartz Scene newsletter: "I have a very strong musical staff, headed by my musical director, Stephen Oremus, who worked in that capacity with my son, Scott, on TICK, TICK, ... BOOM! and also musical directed Andrew Lippa's THE WILD PARTY. His assistant (in a clear case of over-qualification) will be the brilliant Alex Lacamoire, who was Scott's musical director on BAT BOY and did the fantastic new arrangements for the GODSPELL tour that can be heard on the DRG recording."

The multitalented thirty-two-year-old Oremus is a graduate of Berklee College of Music, Boston. He began with WICKED in 2000 or 2001. Oremus and Schwartz sat together to work on the vocal arrangements during the process. Stephen the composer normally likes to do his own vocal arrangements but this time he had the other Stephen who was so in tune with what he wanted, that they could work together, brainstorm, and come up with the final results. Once Alex Lacamoire joined them in 2002, they worked out the incidental music together. I suspect it's more fun and more creative for them to work that way.

Oremus said about the arrangement process when we spoke: Stephen [Schwartz] was overseeing it the entire time and doing it in collaboration with us. Nothing ever got put into the show that Stephen didn't accept or approve."

As a final note, don't forget that the orchestrations are done by Bill Brohn. Again, the process began

with meetings in which Schwartz indicated the direction he wanted the overall sound to take.

Brohn's credits: WILLIAM DAVID BROHN (Orchestrations) received the 1998 Tony Award for Best Orchestrations for Ragtime. He's been heard globally for his work on Miss Saigon, The Secret Garden, Show Boat, Crazy For You and Carousel; in London's West End with Oliver!, The Witches of Eastwick, My Fair Lady and South Pacific; and recently in New York with Sweet Smell of Success, A Man of No Importance and Oklahoma!. He has provided arrangements for Marilyn Horne, James Galway, Placido Domingo and for Joshua Bell's recent recording on Sony Classical of Bernstein's West Side Story Suite for Violin and Orchestra.

And dance arrangements by Jim Abbott.

Reused Riffs

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, While listening to the Wicked OBCR, I noticed that there is a strings/trumpet riff used in both "No Good Deed" and "Hellfire" from The Hunchback... In Wicked, it's in the transition from the bridge to the chorus, about 2 and a half minutes into the song: "If that's all good deeds are, maybe that's the reason why [riff] No good deed..." In "Hellfire", it's used before the dialogue ("and let her taste the fires of hell, or let her be mine or mine alone [riff] *spoken* Minister...." and also used throughout the song in varying degrees, especially in the end.

My question is twofold: First, did you use it in Wicked, conscious of its heavy use in a previously written song? And secondly, is this riff used elsewhere, and is it common of you to reuse pieces of music like that? For example, are there things you borrowed from Pippin for Wicked, or what not? And while I'm posting, I must add that I've loved and enjoyed much of your music, and I eagerly await the Wicked vocal selections book's release. Augie

Answer from Stephen Schwartz

Dear Augie: You know, I noticed that too. It was unconscious (particularly since the music for HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME is by Alan Menken, and not myself.) It's a fairly common orchestral "build" figure, but probably if I'd noticed it soon enough, I would have altered it slightly for WICKED. Thanks, Stephen Schwartz

Synths/Sound Modules/Keyboards in Wicked

Question:

Hi, I was wondering if you could tell me specifically what synths, sound modules and/or keyboards are used in the orchestrations for Wicked. I am a keyboardist and am always interested in staying on top of current trends in the pit. Thanks, Chris

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Chris: All our synths are Kurzweils. Keyboards 2 and 3 each play a Kurzweil 2600. Keyboard 1 plays a Yamaha acoustic MIDI Piano (with the "silent" feature) that often layers sounds from a K2600 rack-mount. The specific sounds were programmed by our talented and creative synth programmer, Andy Barrett. I hope that provides some of the information you were interested in. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from Carol de Giere

I've just posted something on my site that might be of interest. It's a short piece I wrote based on my

interview with the synth programmer.

See the Special Sounds section on this page:

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/wicked-orchestrations.htm>

Synths in Wicked

Question: Is there any reason why synths are used in Wicked? Is it personal preference or budget concerns?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The synths are used not as substitutes for other acoustic instruments, but for the contemporary keyboard and percussion sounds (and unusual effects) that they create. The exception to this is the use of a synth to thicken the string section, since a real orchestra has a huge string section and a modern Broadway orchestra usually entails at most a string quartet. As long as there is an acoustic string section, synth strings can prove very effective in combination with them. But mostly the synths in the WICKED orchestra are being used as instruments in their own right. Thanks for your interest, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from Zack Q.:

No doubt that the K2600 is a powerful piece of hardware...I've used it pretty extensively. Out of curiosity, have On-Broadway and/or Off-Broadway musicals started to adopt more of a computer/software combination to reinforce their acoustic counterparts rather than hardware solutions? I'm speaking of software samplers like Gigastudios or Kontakt and pro-grade sample libraries like Vienna Symphonic Library, Garritan's Orchestral Strings, or Quantum Leap's Symphonic Orchestra? Just a little curious if they have started to find their way into musical theatre orchestra pits or not...as I use this stuff everyday in my studio.

Comment from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Zack: I can't speak for other Broadway shows. We are not using samples such as the kind you describe (not to my knowledge anyway), and frankly, I'm not sure they are legal from the point of view of the musician's union. I am familiar with the Vienna Symphonic Library, which is excellent, since I use it in my studio. But I'd be surprised if any Broadway pits use samples that are in effect additional unpaid musicians. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Synth Sounds in Wicked DX Rhodes

Question:

Hi Stephen! I'm a keyboard player on a national tour at the moment, and I'm always interested in what's happening in other pits. I'm a big fan of the DX Rhodes sound that was used extensively in the late 80s and 90s, although it seems to have fallen out of fashion. There seem to be several "real" EP sounds on the Wicked soundtrack, but if I'm not mistaken, there's a bit of DX-type Rhodes in Defying Gravity, and perhaps in The Wizard and I? Am I hearing right?

Answer from Michael Cole:

I checked with Andy Barrett and here is his reply:

Nice catch! The DX Electric Piano has become a classic synthesizer sound and is often called for in programming. This is one sound that has never gone out of fashion. We're using Kurzweil K2600's for sound generation in Wicked. There's a stock sound on the K2600 called "FM-ish Electric Piano". I believe this is an emulation of a DX electric piano, although it's not one of the sounds we're using. Most likely what you're hearing is a set of samples of a DX electric piano. Regards, Andy Barrett

Wicked Tour Orchestration

Question:

I'm interested to know if the orchestra size is being reduced for the National Tour and/or other forthcoming productions of WICKED. It would seem a great loss to start cutting instruments but I know this is sadly a common practice. As there are already 3 keyboard parts, I would imagine their books would become even more complicated if this reduction occurred...

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The orchestra is being slightly reduced (and I emphasize "slightly") for the tour. But we are adding a keyboard, so there will now be four, so they won't be overwhelmed. I'm relatively confident there won't be a significant "deprovement" in the sound of the show. I will be listening carefully for this when we make our first stop in Toronto. Thanks for your concern, Stephen Schwartz

Follow up question:

Thanks Stephen for the info. I will be interested to hear how the reduction works. A complete instrumentation listing would also be interesting to read. Is Bill Brohn doing it himself or one of his associates?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Chris Jahnke, one of Bill Brohn's associates (he co-orchestrated A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE with Bill) is working on the actual charts, as Bill is in England working on MARY POPPINS. But Bill will be around to check them out and spruce them up if at all necessary (though I doubt it will be.) I believe the orchestra for the tour is as follows:

4 keyboards, Guitar, Bass, Drums, Percussion, 3 woodwinds, 2 trumpets, French Horn, Trombone, Violin Cello

Popular Orchestration

Question:

One of my favourite songs of yours is "Popular". I think the lyrics are outstanding and Bill Brohn's orchestration is wonderful - lovely use of the Bari. Sax. Did you have any input into the orchestration and arrangement?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks. As always, I have a lot of input about orchestrations of my songs, particularly the rhythm sections (keyboards, guitars, bass, drums and percussion). And of course the orchestrator(s) and I will discuss extensively what other instruments to use and what they will be doing. But I also try to work with extremely talented orchestrators, such as Bill Brohn, who bring so much of their own creativity to the songs. In the case of "Popular", the use of bari sax was definitely one of Bill's contributions. Thanks again for your interest, Stephen Schwartz

Do Arrangers Restructure Songs?

Question:

This might be the single most obscure question to ask, but I'm consumed with curiosity. I understand that the incidental responsibilities of an arranger is to, well, arrange them from songs in the show. And in regards to songs, arrangers create vocal and accompaniment arrangements. My question, though, deals with the song format and insertion in the show. For example, having seen Wicked, I know that "Dancing Through Life" has multiple themes that are broken up with sections of dialogue over

underscore, completing a very lengthy sequence at the end of that scene. Is this a collaboration with the arranger, or the librettist? I know the bookwriter was involved. But, did you create this song as it appears in the show (excluding instrumental dance sections), or did the arranger have a hand in taking your original number and molding it into the show? This may be too confusing for anyone but me to figure out.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Without going into the issue of what "arrangers" do (since it is different under different circumstances, and I suspect, with different composers), let me answer specifically about "Dancing Through Life": This sequence took an enormously long time to work out. As you point out, we were attempting to fold an enormous amount of plot into one number. In addition, this sequence had partially been another number in our out-of-town tryout ("Which Way's the Party?"), a number which had ended in the courtyard. Then there were several scenes which kept changing and being moved around in our structure, and then finally the sequence at the Ozdust Ballroom, which also kept changing in terms of what scenes appeared within it. The final sequence was the result of a (not always easy) collaboration between myself, Winnie (bookwriter), Joe (director, who sort of conceived the way the final sequence would play out), and Wayne (choreographer.) That being said, the way the song appears in the show was devised by me, with the specific underscoring and dance music being "arranged" by our dance arranger, Jim Abbott, with contributions from Stephen Oremus and Alex Lacamoire in terms of the structure of music bridging the individual scenes (I told you it was complicated.) The short way of putting it is that I wrote all the sung music and worked out the order in which the sequences were going to appear, but stringing it together into its final form was aided by the arrangers (and the dance music itself at the Ozdust ballroom was worked out by Jim Abbott in his collaboration with the choreographer.) I realize this explanation may be more confusing than clarifying, but that's the clearest way I can describe what actually took place in devising this complex and, I feel, ultimately successful sequence. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Defying Gravity

Question:

dear mr. Schwartz: what instruments are used in defying gravity?

Answer from Michael Cole:

3 keyboards, 2 guitars, Bass Drums, Percussion, Harp, 2 Vlns, 1 Vla, 1 Cello, 2 Tpts, 2 Tbns, 2 Fr Hns, Flute, Piccolo, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Oboe, English Horn, Bassoon, Bari Sax

Synth

Question:

Mr Cole, could you share with us what are the exact synth sounds that the synthesizers use? While listening to the WICKED CD, I've been trying to identify what are the synths used in the areas where the conventional orchestral instruments are not employed. Thanks!

Answer from Michael Cole:

I don't know ANYTHING about orchestrations - THAT'S why it's difficult for me to describe them. This is from Alex Lacamoire and hopefully it will answer your question about the sounds: "I don't know the specific names of the sounds. Many are from the Kurzweil bank (as we use Kurz 2600s in the show), and many are sounds that are designed by our keyboard programmer, Andy Barrett. So the sounds used in Defying Gravity, for example, may not be found anywhere at all, because Andy created them specifically for us!"

Strings

Question:

I've been wondering how you and your musical team get such a great string section sound with only a string trio actually performing. To emulate a lush violin section, for instance, do you have the violinist perform the part and alter the sound digitally? Or, does a keyboard player perform the sound with a violin-section patch? Or, do you do both?

Answer from Stephen Oremus:

My name is Stephen Oremus, and I'm the Music Supervisor/ Co-Music Arranger on Wicked. Stephen Schwartz forwarded your email to me regarding the string sounds. My apologies for getting back to you so late. It's been busy around here, and then the holidays snuck up on me!

Regarding the string sounds: Basically, we have a live string quartet in the orchestra as well as 3 synthesizers. Keyboard 3 is principally on string patches and he plays along with the live strings. The synthesizers are all Kurzweil 2600's. Our Synth Programmer, Andy Barrett, has provided us with some string samples that he has assembled and programmed that match the tone or style of the strings for each section of the show. They vary from song to song-- and depending on articulation and the types of lines the keyboards will be playing. For instance, the faster lines that require more attack are sometimes played only in parts by the synthesizer, as it would sound too artificial if it were played along with the live strings. So, we have chosen sections for them to either lay out in those moments or highlight pieces of the phrase along with the faster strings for emphasis.

The overall sound mix has also been designed to favor the live strings, so that the synthesizer only enhances the live instruments. Obviously, we are going for realism, except a few spots where we chose to use a more "analog pad" sound in the more pop sounding songs. There we highlight the synthesized strings, as we are going for a more specific pop or otherworldly color in the orchestration.

Thanks so much for your interest in what we are doing down there in the pit at Wicked! Hope you have a wonderful holiday and a happy new year. Best, Stephen Oremus

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

See the other Wicked sections of this archive and the Stephen Schwartz section for the PDF on Orchestrations.